

Shadowplay

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Summary: When he's handed the piece of paper Joseph figures there's no one else who would announce himself in such an old-fashioned, outdated manner. Probably thinks it's cool, he guesses, some sort of trademark, and he smiles, despite himself, despite news of Holly's health, because at least some things never change.

Shadowplay

'It says he'll be meeting us in Aswan,' Joseph says after reading the telegram the pilots gave him before the helicopter took off. Joseph figures he's heard of it from the Speedwagon Foundation, and just decided to tag along.

>'Who's he?' Polnareff loudly interrupts all thoughts, 'there's more help coming? What's their card? The moron?' and he starts laughing.
Joseph frowns, scowls, tries to pretend he's never thought 'moron' fits before he starts: 'Shouldn't you have learned not to underestimate?' before adding 'He's not a stand user,' in a low tone, preparing for what he knows it's coming.

>'What?! If he's not a stand user then how is he any help at all?' It's Polnareff who says it, high pitched, but the question is mimicked in everyone else's faces. Perhaps less so on

Jotaro'sâ€"Joseph wants to think it's because Jotaro trusts his grandfather's judgement.
He scratches his head, and is about to explainâ€"explain the ripple, and part of his youth, and whatever is needed for them to understandâ€"but Polnareff picks another fight with the stand user they came to pick up, Iggy, before they jump in the car, and after, and since nobody brings it up again, Joseph stays silent. Jotaro's mind is probably, like Joseph's, with Holly. And then, of course, the car veers off course and the helicopter lies in ruins.

* * *

><p>After checking Kakyoin and Abdul into the ER of the hospital near

Saint Simeon, Joseph telephones the Old Cataract. While he waits for the hotel's receptionist to pick up he thinks how they're basically only a river apart, again.
'Please hold,' the receptionist says and Joseph looks out onto the horizon, two tall minarets rising from the shrub looking trees that paint it green, sailboats on the Nile.

>'It seems he has gone to lunch,' she says, finallyâ€"the waiting music was drilling into his brainâ€"but it's not a relief.
'What!? Lunch? How dare he? How can he just go off to lunch without us? He doesn't even know where we are!'

>'I understand, sir. I relayed your message already. Do you need anything else?'
'Ah, no. Thank you,' he says and hangs up. He looks out the window beside the payphone once more, until a woman taps on his shoulder because she too has a call to make.

>'Yes, sorry' he turns around without looking at her and there is Jotaro, hands in pockets.
'How's Kakyoin?' Joseph asks.

>Jotaro just 'hm's, which probably means Kakyoin's alright, then says 'You alright, old man? You're acting weirder than usual.'
Joseph smiles broadlyâ€"it's very sincere and he wouldn't be able to hide it even if he wanted toâ€"and thanks Jotaro for asking. This just makes Jotaro frown harder, and groan. So Joseph laughs, and it fills the entire roomâ€"the woman on the phone turns to shush himâ€"as he pats Jotaro's back while reassuring him everything's alright.

>'Let's get to the hotel, we'll pick Abdul up tomorrow. What about Kakyoin?'
'Hm. We may have to make the rest of the trip without him.'

>Joseph nods and says nothing. He wishes the boy's sight will be alright. He knows it's better if they leave him behind, after all.<p>

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><p>As they climb the steps into the terrace, Jotaro asks 'Who are we going to meet, old man?'
Joseph grins 'You'll see' and thinks his grandson has great timingâ€"like a comic book heroâ€"because just then he comes into view: sitting in one of the wooden chairs, framed by the view onto the river, Caesar Zeppeli blowing bubbles out of his pipe, his back turned to them in a carefully careless mannerâ€"like a comic book hero that's already noticed them, Joseph knows, but doesn't give himself away.

Jotaro gazes up, finds the silhouette of the old man blowing bubbles and remembers. Remembers childhood summers spent on boats in the waters of Maidstone beach. His father's absence on tour, his mother's eyes looking at her father, her mother, this old man and his son, his daughters, his grandchildren. His father's absence. On tour somewhere. This old man looking too young, anywhere between twenty and fifty, his real age. His grandchildren swimming with Jotaro, the eldest teaching him and the others how to use a snorkel correctly. His father's absence. This old man asking 'You didn't want him to leave?' and Jotaro thinking no one ever asks him that, he tells no one ever anything like that, and nodding, and this old man, Caesar, patting his head. He knows why he forgets these memories, sometimes. Mostly, he doesn't remember enough to know he forgets.

Caesar jumps from a seated position and Joseph starts laughing, all but runs towards the other man, and they hug tightly when they're finally close enough. Caesar smiles into his beardâ€"nicotine and soap and the golden light of Naples fill his noseâ€"and Joseph thinks it'd be better if Jotaro didn't see any tears on his face. He wipes

them and, arm still slung over Caesar's shoulder, wide smile prepared, he turns to Jotaro and Polnareff, but ends up doubling over in pain. Caesar's twisting his ear with practice perfected by age, years of knowing Joseph.

>'Why didn't you tell me about this before? I have to hear from the foundation?'
'Ow, ow, stop twisting, Caesar!'

>'And they ask me not to tell Suzie Q?' at this he looks up at Jotaro, 'You've grown too tall,' he says, then adds 'you should've told your grandmother, no matter what this old man told you to do.'
He lets go and walks closer to Jotaro 'It's nice to see you again,' he says and shakes the boy's hand.

>'Isn't it nice to see me, too?' Joseph pouts and walks up behind the other man, drops his weight on one of his shoulders. Caesar hmphs and says 'of course,' plants his hand on Joseph's face to push him away.
'This is Jean Pierre Polnareff,' Jotaro introduces.

'Polnareff this old man is the old man's friend.'

>They shake hands. Polnareff looks confused but Joseph guesses he doesn't quite know what to ask. And Caesar's used to Joseph finding new people along the way, used to getting to know them later, when he can.
'We can all sit down here, or go to one of the restaurants. You haven't had lunchâ€'

>'You! You had lunch without us? What's that about?'
'Was I supposed to wait? Who knows how long it would've taken you! I assumed I'd be waiting here for a day or two before you decided to show up,' Caesar says before Joseph's twisting his ear with practice perfected by age, years of knowing Caesar, who lets out an angry 'Mamma mia!'

>'Mister Joestar' Polnareff says. Jotaro tsks and says nothing.
'Let's go someplace in the city, I don't want to be in this hotel where Cesare had lunch without us.'

While they walk, Caesar tells Joseph how his family is doingâ€"doesn't forget to mention they all know where he is and whyâ€"asks Polnareff a couple of questions, bums a cigarette from Jotaroâ€"Joseph protests as loudly as he can, says he won't visit while Caesar dies of cancer in the hospitalâ€"but mostly they're silent. When they get to the restaurant Oingo and Boingo make sure the meal is too eventful for conversation.

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><p>It isn't until they're on their way to Cairo, northbound along the Nile, that they can really talk.
Back thenâ€"back then is so often in his tongue these daysâ€"back then they always had time to talk. A month, at least. A whole month. Now it's fifty daysâ€"and not a lot of them leftâ€"but they're not spent training, they're not spent learning italian, pretending they were sure to get out of thatâ€"Joseph pretended far betterâ€"it's one person after the other, endless, exhausting, becomes boring and monotonous after a while, but the edge is never off.

>'It's different,' Caesar says, taking the pipe out of his mouth. His features are lit by the fire they've made near the embankment. 'It's different because it's your daughter's life, not yours.'
'Yeah,' Joseph mumbles, watching Jotaro and Abdul listen to Polnareff's expressive tale, some ways away. 'Yeahâ€|'

They're silent for a while, Caesar looks to the river, away from Joseph.

>'That's why I couldn't tell her.'
'What?'

>'Suzie, I couldn't tell her. Because it's not my life, it's

Holly's.'
'All the more reason to, you idiot. She's her daughter too! Jotaro's her grandson! And what? If Jotaro's stand hadn't awoken, you wouldn't have told him either? Does the musician know?'

>'Ah, not like that bastard would return home even if he did knowâ€| But no, if Jotaro's stand hadn't, I wouldn't have.'
Caesar clocks him over the head. Joseph's sure he must have a dent in the shape of Caesar's hand from all the years of being struck like that.

>'Oi, what's that for!?'
'What do you think? They're your family, they shouldâ€"they have a right to know!'

>Are you still speaking to your father, Caesar, Joseph would never say out loud, but it's always there. Caesar must know.
He's blowing harder on the bubble pipe, like he does when he's frustrated, the tip of his nose almost red, and Joseph thinks he looks handsome. He was glad, strangely grateful, when Caesar stopped using the ripple to look youngâ€"Suzie Q had applauded him, of course, she didn't want to look older than Caesarâ€"even if it was underwhelming. Nothing changed of course, Caesar was handsome, he'd always be handsome, but Joseph wondered what had taken him so long. Years later, one time the two of them met in Naples, Caesar told him he didn't want to let the ripple go because it was like leaving a large part of what had brought them together behind. Joseph had already stopped years before, at Suzie's request, and it seemed now to Caesar that the ripple was just a memory. It'd been Joseph's turn to clock himâ€"Caesar must also have a dent in his head. 'This, now, this is it! No need for the ripple. Before too, when the three of us all lived togetherâ€| Everything. The ripple is just a thing, but us, you and I, us, that's it. If you don't wanna live off memories, then this is it,' he'd said, and Caesar had paused, wide eyed, before laughing, holding onto Joseph.

>'Why did you come?' Joseph finally asks. He feels the question's been stuck in his throat, and near his heart, for longer than he's been out here, looking for Dio.
Caesar scowls but Joseph was so ready for that exact scowl, he makes it himself. 'Why do you think?'

There have been risks later. Smaller ones. Caesar will be reading the newspapers and mention of an accident in the NYC subway will make him lose his paused, controlled breathing for a second. He'll be on his way to Capodichino, or Nouaceur, or another airport in another city where they're supposed to meet and he'll pretend he doesn't fear for Joseph's life when he knows his luck with planes. But mostly, mostly it's just that. It's Smokey coming and giving the news to him at the hospital, days later, once he's woken. Caesar hanging on to his belief, not letting himself mourn, arguing loudly with Lisa Lisa when she takes everyone to New York to hold a service for an empty casket. It's rain falling down. It's emptiness. It's realising the world no longer holds any meaning. Having a family might not hold any meaning anymore, either. It's not raining, it's pouring down. Even if it seemed that Caesar was the only one not surprised when Joseph showed up for his funeral, late but very much alive. Even so, it's the emptiness of that casket, life, meaning, purpose. Just that.

Joseph looks at him like he wants to protest. He gets 'But' out then stops himself.

>'Look,' Caesar startsâ€"fourty years don't pass by in vain, Joseph thinks, it's clear Caesar understands. 'This is what I want. And even if I can't see them, I can sense them. And you saw the ripple works on them just as well. And it's going to work on Dio, stand or no stand.'
'I understand,' and a pause, 'He killed your grandfather,

too. Go ahead, you can lecture me,' Joseph smiles what he feels is not sad but might as well be. Caesar doesn't say anything. Fourty years don't pass by in vain, Joseph thinks. It's not simply about grandparents neither of them ever met anymore, that much is obvious.

>'He reminds me of Lisa Lisa,' Caesar looks to Jotaro, who's sitting with his face obscured by the left hand cupping his cigarette and lighter.
'Ah, maybe,' Joseph says. 'He's not exactly the kid he was when you met him.'

>'You still are though.'
>'What's that supposed to mean?'

>Caesar ruffles his hair, pushes his head down with too much force 'What do you think, you idiot?'
Joseph tries to get Caesar in a headlock while he says 'Who's the brat, hah? I'm not afraid of getting old. How long did you use the ripple to look younger than your children, fifty years?'

>'How could I deprive the world of my youthful appearance?'
'Ah, Caesar, Caesar, you're not all that,' Joseph says, holding Caesar's wrists in his hands, rubbing circular motions on the inside of themâ€"like he used to do.

>'What? I so am!' Caesar uses the ripple to rid himself of Joseph 'I've told you to practise more, Jojo.'
>'Yeah, yeah, be careful, Cesare, you can ruin my hand,' he says, watching Caesar look for the pipe he let go of during the struggle and thinks about how he'd like to kiss Caesar. How he knows Caesar would like to kiss him. But there's a time and place. And it's not now.

>'You're old,' Caesar says mindlessly, looking to the river, 'we both are.'
>Joseph says nothing, stares at his hand, and thinks he knows what Caesar means.

It seems to Caesar the month spent with Jojo, when they gambled their lives on a bluff, was made up of days wholly distinguishable from one another. Now years feel to last as long as one of those days. It's been one and two and ten and fourty. The wrinkles on Suzie's face, that only showed when she smiled too much, squinted too hard, have taken permanent residence near her eyes, there all the time, by the edges of her mouth, between the almost transparent eyebrows. Jojo's facial hair that he grew as a jokeâ€"it had to be a jokeâ€"was never shaved and has now turned grey; it expertly hides even more pronounced wrinkles than the ones on her still smooth skin. He goes back to days after that month that were still full, complete days, not years condensed, but not as long. Different. Living in a mansion in New York, occupying all spaces between the three of them, the end of the month in autumn. Suzie and Jojo sitting him down to listen to a radio show, a newsstory about martians attacking the planet, though she wanted to listen to that Bergen comic guy Caesar never paid attention to. Days are full and he returns to that, holding their hands across the table. Days are incomplete and he returns to them, his children weren't always by his side, they visited with their mother, and now they've grown. Grandchildren don't visit often, some don't live in the same city, same country. He returns to fights, mostly with Jojo, mostly about family, always about Jotaro's father, always about how Jojo never asked, how he, and everyone else, pretended that if Jojo was there it was alright if the musicianâ€"Caesar can't remember his nameâ€"wasn't, that it would be alright. Them saying 'it's alright, Jotaro's always alright, he's always fine' and him remaining stubborn. Being told this wasn't his family. Silence that lasted days that were years. Incomplete days away from the family that was not his own thinking about the boy growing up without a father while everyone pretended nothing was odd. Nothing odd about his aggressive behaviourâ€"it's probably a cultural

thing, Jojo had said, and Caesar had clocked him over for ignorance and racism"so Caesar stayed silent, because this wasn't his family, they'd said, made sure he knew. But it was there, it was there on the feel of a wrench in his hand, lifetimes ago. Nothing odd about it, though. The Joestars made a practice of secrecy, he'd learned in his years with Lisa Lisa, long before he and Jojo ever knew. Nothing odd about that, either. Nothing odd about not telling the musician his wife is dying, his son is gambling his life in Egypt, Jotaro being asked to hide it, too. Robbed of a reason to be angry at the man. Or worse.

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><p>Caesar stands with Jotaro and Polnareff underneath the window of Jojo's room, listens to Polnareff's complaints, watches the fist of the french man waving in the air. It isn't until Caesar raises his voice to add a comment that Jojo's head pops out the window, his own fist raised.
'I'll get you back for that, Zeppeli!'

>'Yes, yes, old man. Maybe we can drop you off at the geriatric and keep going on our own. You never liked working hard.'
>'Hey! I'd go right down to kick your ass!'

>'Then do, so we can get our breakfast' Caesar blows out more bubbles.
'Y-yeah' then his head disappears into the room again and for a brief moment Caesar worries. There was something in his face that Caesar thinks he recognises"but then again. Caesar sees Jojo's face in pain wherever he goes, these days. Sometimes he rides the train and instead of the reflection of an old man with white hair is one of a young man with brown, his eyes wide and his hand to his throat, and Caesar knows his lips are spelling out 'ring' in incredulous tones. He tells himself Abdul is up there with him, and glances at Jotaro who was also looking and seems to not have seen anything.

>It's some minutes before any of them say anything. Polnareff has sat down on the floor, looks at the children playing in the mud (he thinks how wonderful it would be to be a kid again, and Caesar thinks how wonderful it would be if his kids were kids again, admonishes himself for being so old), and Caesar blows bubbles with his pipe.
'It's been too long, Jotaro.'

>Jotaro nods, he had been staring at his watch.
'They could've run into an enemy' he says and doesn't betray his worry, and Caesar thinks, again, about Lisa Lisa.

>It's not even three metres or five of walking before Polnareff has disappeared. And not three seconds before Jotaro manages to get lost himself. Caesar runs a hand through his hair. 'Like grandfather' he gets out before going off in search for them.
It takes him a while"he's old"and by the time he finds him, Jotaro is being warned by a child"Polnareff?"not to step on someone's shadow. It's not enough for Caesar because he can't see the shadow, just vaguely guess where it is after he sees Jotaro barely touch it and regress into a child in front of his eyes. Caesar feels his skin being pulled, feels weights being lifted, and, most of all, feels aches he didn't even know were there leaving his bones. Above all this, a cloud casted over everything, he can feel the ripple, his mastery of it, running along youthful arteries, new muscles, flexible joints, and he has to admit he's missed this when he jumps and his knee doesn't threaten to give in and let him fall.

>It isn't that, despite himself, that he focuses on but Jotaro. His small frame hidden underneath a uniform too large"he really is too tall, less bulky than Jojo, but too tall all the same"and he remembers seeing this same child looking out onto the sea during

summers spent with Jojo and Suzie, before Jotaro and Holly stopped going, before Caesar was told in the darkâ€"because the dark pulls the words you'd not usually say out of you, does away with your reticence, your retaliationâ€"that this was not his family. This boy peering from under his hat, now, this boy years ago peering into the sea, nodding without really looking back at Caesar, not shying away, not giving himself away either. His anger seems genuine, still. And it's not the Jotaro with seventeen years, released from jail, who pushes mother and grandfather and those who are near, away, with shoves and harsh words, and would probablyâ€"Caesar wants to think this isn't just himself, not just his own ideas of how it should be, of how it isâ€"would probably want to shove his father away, be angry at him, watch his face and not his absence, hold his hand, swim with him, learn to snorkel, give him the smile he sometimes, not often, gives Holly, before taking it back. His anger seems genuine when he asks not to be underestimated (and there is Caesar asking Jojo not to decide for the kid, not to hide things from him, and Jojo waving his hand in the air, cutting the air, cutting history, hiding everything, Not now, Cesare).
It only really takes one shock of the ripple for this stand user to be inabilitated but the child Jotaro is now doesn't relent. And despite himself, again, Caesar smiles what he feels is not sad but might as well be at the sight of the child's fists connecting to an adult's face. Before the guy drops unconscious, immoveable, he speaks: 'J-Jotaroâ€| has always been this kind of person?!!' and Caesar thinks it over. He's not exactly the kid he was when you met him, comes back to him, as do his wrinkles, the aches, that strange hollowness in his knees, and it's too tempting to use the ripple, again, to look and feel too young, like it ought to be. He's not exactly the kid, repeats, as he watches the teenager beat the man into oblivion while barely moving. His tongue curls around the words, sure that he'll spit them out for Jojo later: I don't think the kid you think he was ever existed. His tongue is curling and savouring the words with bitterness and sadnessâ€"memories of Jojo speak of Jotaro's sweetness, wide eyed, and Caesar watching the boy, guarded, closed off, his hands stretched into sea water, shrugging off his mother's tender touch and smiles. His tongue curls around the words, still, when he sees the scene transpire between Jotaro and Polnareff. Jotaro's barely-there smile, the touch of his hand to the other man's shoulder, a roaring silence saying too much; Polnareff's smile, his eager innocence, returned with discrete gestures reserved for a few. Caesar thinks of the ones and many Jojo might've received, will receive, and he smiles. He uncurls his tongue and the words float away unspoken. Once Jojo is in sight all he has is nagging for his tardiness and lack of responsibility.

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><p>It's the night, hours after Hol Horse's meddling with Polnareff, hours, perhaps, before they'll figure out where the mansion is, find Dio, and Joseph walks the aisles of the Old Winter Palace. He drags the fingers of his mechanical hand against the walls as he walks towards Caesar's room. Like walking other halls, in other lifetimes, some of them ones he never even got to live, walking, his hand grazing the wall, to meet Caesar at night. Caesar's already hafway across the door when he gets there. Joseph poses his hand, the other one, on Caesar's arm, and says, purposefully 'Let's go, Cesare'. Years in learning that calling him Cesare was a sure way of getting him to do his bidding almost without having to ask. More years, much later, in learning that 'Cesare' evokes a grandmother, in much the

same manner chinese porcelain and decoration plates do, cold wrinkled hands, warmed by kitchen fire, from the depths of forgotten childhoods. They're met by Polnareff and Kakyoin and Abdul and Jotaro at the restaurant. They talk and laugh and say nothing; silence weighs their words down but Joseph knows he can count on Caesar to be silly, they've perfected it with years of synchronised foolish thoughts. By the end of dinner, he half expects Caesar to stay behind when everyone else leaves, but Caesar leaves when Jotaro does, after Abdul and Kakyoin already have, and Joseph, seated next to Polnareff, watches Caesar put a friendly hand to Jotaro's back, watches them disappear into the terrace above, and doesn't think about following.<p>

Jotaro remembers the sun beating down on the beach. Walking down Egypt Lane, past the golf club, mist coming in from the sea. The old man's new Sea Ray that he'd gotten some months before rocking gently with the waves. His hand outstretched, touching the water, touching the sun reflected on the water, almost blinding, droplets of salt water hitting his face, his other arm asleep under the weight of his head, trapped between his left cheek and the edges of the bow. He remembers this when, in the terrace, Caesar asks him for a cigarette, asks him not to tell the old man—he remembers they've always been close, the old man, and grandma, and Caesar, all nagging at each other like his mother nags at him—he remembers summers, learning to snorkel, the wake of the boat behind it conveying the same thing Star Platinum conveys, traces left behind by things that cannot touch or be touched. His mother's smile. His father's absence. Nothing of importance.

'Are you worried about him?' Caesar asks from behind the cigarette.

>Jotaro remembers, too, that he asks what no one else does. He says nothing.
Caesar says nothing too. This isn't his family. You should be kinder, rests on his tongue, unpronounced. He figures, he knows, he figures he knows, the weight of the wrench in his hand is different than Jotaro's, now that he's seen him, really seen him. Made of a different matter. And he thinks, he knows, and thinks he understands that Jotaro should, regardless, be kinder. Caesar knows he'll understand, one day. One day, if they make it out of this alive. And maybe one day—it's unfair, he shouldn't understand, he shouldn't have to. Caesar imagines Jojo's secret apprehensions, ones not even Jojo knows, imagines them because, after all these years, all this time, they're now Caesar's, all the things Jojo doesn't quite know about himself.

>He shouldn't have to understand because then he'll justify. Caesar knows he will, because at first, the first years with the Foundation and a family side by side, he did too. And it ended in divorce. And his children not being with him always, incomplete days when they visit with their mother. He shouldn't have justified, and he did. Because, in the end, he shouldn't have understood in the first place. But he did. Deceit out of love is deceit, regardless. And he's too much like Lisa Lisa. They both are.<p>

'Let's head back,' Jotaro says, crushing the butt of his cigarette in the ashtray. 'The old man will get lonely.'

>And Caesar smiles, and nods, says 'yes', and heads back with the boy, pats him on the back. 'Don't worry, we'll have his back.'<p>

End
file.